

New Forest Notes – February 1994

THE DRAINING OF BALMER LAWN

THIS month will see an important visit to the New Forest by Lord Cranbrook, chairman of English Nature (the successor to the Nature Conservancy council). It is billed either as a peace conference or a battle depending upon whether one is of an optimistic or pessimistic turn of mind. Eminent representing New Forest farming on one side and conservation on the other have been invited to meet the chairman and rehearse the old arguments on drainage and grazing improvement or maintenance. The hope of the agriculturists will be that English Nature can be forced to give ground in its hard line opposition to such works in the Forest, especially drainage which has proved a particularly difficult problem. The conservation lobby, on the other hand, will be anxious to ensure that rare plants and animals are not put at risk by damage to the Forest's wetlands which they so highly prize. Altogether, I would not give much for the chances of a successful outcome to this meeting, although no doubt some reassuring form of words will be found to cloak any lack of achievement. Moreover, the invited membership of the conference is distinctly odd. The very small group being allowed to meet his lordship will include the Chairman of the New Forest District Council who, however well intentioned, is scarcely likely to understand the complexities of conservation or common right farming, and whose council has in any case no say whatever in how the open waste of the Forest is managed. On the other hand, very knowledgeable members of the Drainage Advisory Committee will not be given an opportunity of attending. The commoners can at least be thankful that the chairman of the Commoners Defence Association will be one of those invited to the meeting and the Association is determined to ensure that it is more than just an indoor discussion. First on its priority list for a visit is Balmer Lawn at Brockenhurst. Here a maintenance plan for the drainage system has been effectively blocked by English Nature, to the fury of local farmers. They point out that any work undertaken at Balmer Lawn will be strictly maintenance of existing drains and not improvement of some virgin mire. Indeed, of all the grazing areas of the Forest, Balmer Lawn has perhaps the best documented history of improvement. In 1845 the Southampton and Dorchester Railway Company succeeded in securing an Act which allowed the construction of its line across the New Forest. The Company paid heavily for the privilege with the Crown exacting the (then) huge sum of £12,000 in compensation. The Act provided that this sum should be expended for the joint benefit of the Crown and the commoners in draining the Forest, A leading drainage authority of the day, Mr. Josiah Parkes, was commissioned to draw up a scheme and this included the drainage of the major lawns by the drains (underground pipes) discharging to open ditches. Mr. Parkes concentrated his plans on the area around Brockenhurst. chiefly because he recommended - and later built a Tilery, (the Victoria' Brick and Tile Works) at Pignell Hill just outside the village. He was also anxious to minimise haulage costs of pipes from the works. One of his target areas, Weare's Lawn, we now know as The Weirs. Here he records that the morass "abuts on the skirts of Brockenhurst, rendering the air most insalubrious, and occasioning constant disease among the ". However, it is almost certain that Balmer Lawn provided the pilot project as it compromised 140 acres immediately adjoining the Tilrey. Mr Parkes; "caused numerous holes to be dug" in Balmer Lawn and found the subsoil to be of a pervious texture and thus suitable for tile draining. Unfortunately, the precise records of the work

undertaken here and on other sites have been lost, but ample evidence of Mr Parkes's pipework was revealed during the maintenance of the open cuttings in 1970. Balmer Lawn thus has a well documented history of drainage going back over 140 years. What has especially enraged the Commoners is that despite the fact that they are almost always seeking drainage maintenance not improvement, the plans are still rejected by English Nature. The farming community accept, if not understand, English Nature's desire to protect primeval bogs with their communities of rare plants and animals, but not the expansion of these sacrosanct communities into areas which have been improved and then allowed to deteriorate. Lord Cranbrook will clearly need the wisdom of Solomon if he is to solve the Balmer Lawn dispute and others like it.

Unrecorded Place Names

It may seem almost incredible that, almost two hundred years after the first Ordnance Survey maps were published and in the middle of densely populated and urban-minded Southern England, there are still traditional place names in use that have never been recorded in writing. About 30 years ago, when I first started to record such names, I was in some doubt about their validity and antiquity. Then I came across the name "Crook Hill bridge" applied to a bridge over the railway near Ashurst. This name was, and remains, in very general use amongst the Commoners, but has never appeared on any Ordnance Survey map. Crook Hill however does figure on a government map of 1789-fifty years before the railway was built. That satisfied me as to the genuineness of a large number of local names which have since come to light.

Unfortunately the recording of "new" names is fraught with difficulty. Firstly they have to be picked up from conversation in which they are often spoken indistinctly and quite incidentally to the main subject under discussion. The ability to identify recorded names also presupposes detailed knowledge of those which are already known. A glance at the Six Inch O.S. map will give some idea of the magnitude of that problem. Sadly, the number of old Commoners with a wide knowledge of Forest names, whether map recorded or otherwise, declines every year so that time is running out.

Finally, there is the obvious difficulty over spelling. If a name has never been written down, it follows that no-one has any idea of its "correct" spelling. An example of this was recently provided by one of my colleagues on the Verderers Court. Stage Firs is, it seems a local name for the central part of Beaulieu Aerodrome. However, if this name is of any antiquity, it is unlikely to be spelt in so straightforward a way Scots Pine (the "firs" of the Commoners' language) was the first commercial conifer to be introduced into the Forest, probably, about 1770. Before that there would have been no "firs". The name is thus more likely to be Stage Furze - furze, being the local name for gorse.

Another recently recorded name from the same source is that of Meadows Cross just to the north of Crockford on the road from Lymington to Beaulieu. My informant had no knowledge of its origin, although to anyone familiar with the archaeology of the area, the name fits very neatly into its surroundings. It lies immediately beside one of the largest Mediaeval field systems in the Forest evidently the meadows of the name.

Not all unmapped names are of great age. Many for example, were born of the wartime encroachments on the Forest. Others can be traced to a particular event, or land use. The best known example of this class is Slaughter' Hollies on the A31 near Bolderwood, the origin of which was

remembered by the late Mr Bert Peckham of Minstead. In 1896, the Duke of Connaught's troops on manoeuvre in the Forest purchased a bullock at Minstead, which they then drove to their camp near Highland Water for slaughter . The event impressed local people and the name stuck. When I first encountered it as a child, it was from the agister for the district who referred to the place as the "Killing Bushes". I naturally assumed that this referred to the terrible toll of commoners' animal killed on the then unfenced main road. The agister had no idea of its origin and it was left to Mr Peckham to reveal the true story.

The survival of such names is wholly dependent upon a close-knit farming community with an intimate knowledge of the physical details of the Forest and a strong sense of tradition and continuity. As this community breaks down the chances of further research diminish and the Forest will be the poorer for the loss of such curious names as Burnt Fuzzen (Bramshaw Golf Course) and Devils Claw in Crows Nest Bottom.